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ABSTRACT

Although it has been in the lexicon for 20 years, educational accountability remains an untested concept. Traditionally used in public service areas involving the stewardship of public funds, the term loses its legal-financial context when applied to educational settings. Here, accountability is mainly concerned with furthering school systems' educational effectiveness. Two perennial and conflicting themes are involved in American educational accountability: (1) a quest for efficiency (nonfraudulent use of public money); and (2) an extension of the democratic drive for equal opportunity. These conflicting interpretations make implementation of accountability very difficult. This paper discusses this difficulty, highlighting teacher and student evaluation problems, diversity of opinion issues (like centralization versus decentralization), and teachers' negative, punitive attitudes toward accountability. Ameliorative measures are suggested to overcome opposing viewpoints and make accountability seem a more positive undertaking. There is little evidence, however, that accountability as currently practiced has produced better teachers or instruction. Our society's justice-sensitive and litigious spirit and its disenchantment with the scientific method can confuse conceptualizations of the teacher evaluation process. Accountability is often viewed as a one-way flow of responsibility contrary to our democratic sense of fairness. A two-way relationship among all participants that recognizes both controllable and noncontrollable inputs is essential. Since any accountability system can be subverted by unsympathetic, unwilling staff, then agreement by all is crucial. Included are 12 references. (MLH)

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EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN A CONTEXT OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

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Despite the fact that it has been in the educational lexicon for twenty years, accountability is still a largely untested concept in the field of education. Defined variously as responsibility, explicability, and answerability, accountability has traditionally been used with reference to service in the public interest, where the stewardship of public funds requires some form of accounting. In its educational usage, ambiguity has occurred because the term has been removed from its legal-financial context and applied to a situation where there is, as yet, no body of tradition to explain and support its application.

As used in education, accountability refers mainly to a concern for furthering the educational effectiveness of school systems. Two perennial themes in American education are involved in accountability. They can and do frequently conflict. One is a quest for efficiency, i.e. a demand that public money, once appropriated, not be wasted either through fraudulence or incompetence. The other refers to an extension of the democratic drive for equality of opportunity. In this sense, accountability is interpreted to mean that the benefits of education must be shared equally by all, i.e. not only must the inputs of education be available equally to all, rather the outcomes or achievements of education should be guaranteed to all students regardless of origin, gender, background, or handicap. Implementation of accountability in its interpretations both severally and individually has been difficult, to say the least.

A working, operational definition of accountability which seems to best reconcile both interpretations is that accountability is the acceptance of responsibility for consequences by those entrusted with the public service of education. Such a definition applies, of course, not only to school systems per se but to individual instructional programs utilized within such systems. It has also been broadened to encompass whole states as well. Accountability acknowledges "the public's right to know", i.e. to know what actions have been taken in the schools it supports and how effective these actions have been in meeting the goals (expressed above) of equality. Further, this definition suggests that the "redress" implicit in the concept of accountability is more than the mere imposition of some penalty on those responsible for failure. It suggests that educators be required to redesign educational activities so as to achieve the desired goals of effectiveness, efficiency, and/or equality.

Because educational experience and tradition have never before been truly concerned with any of the above, measures of evaluation had been limited to student "grades". It follows that if educators are to be held accountable for student performance, the desired performances must, one, be more clearly defined and specified in advance—hence the move toward behaviorally stated objectives—, and two, better, more valid and reliable measures of

performance must be devised—hence the emergence of educational evaluation as both a specialty and an "industry". Accountability is virtually unattainable without a well-designed and coordinated system of evaluation. If the "Public" is to be kept abreast of progress; if legislators are to make informed decisions about initiation or continuation of funding; if professional educators themselves are to make appropriate program corrections, continuous and substantial monitoring is essential. On-going research is also necessary to provide information about relationships of various inputs to outcomes, about instructional treatments that show promise of success, and about those variables that seem to have the most significant impact on learning. The data thus gathered can indicate alternative instructional strategies/programs, as well as provide for better budgetary control.

A number of approaches have been advanced as means toward making education programs more accountable, but without any clear agreement as to their complete feasibility in establishing responsibility for any particular sector(s) of the educational community. Because of the pluralism of American society and the diversity of opinion about educational goals, such agreement is difficult to achieve. In addition, the conflict between proponents of centralization and supporters of decentralization make arrangements for viable and productive public participation in

important educational decisions equally tenuous, thus affecting the public's ability and willingness to share power to set the goals of school systems, to point out educational and training needs, or to suggest programs designed to satisfy those needs.

Because the major emphasis of the accountability movement has centered on student performance outcomes and teacher classroom performance, teachers and teacher organizations have shown great reluctance to accept any accountability system. They feel that resultant findings may distort their roles in and responsibility for educational outcomes. It is, of course, the teacher who must ultimately translate educational objectives into student performance. Teachers feel--not without reason--that it is not they alone who produce these outcomes; that hard-to-change conditions beyond their control may equally explain why students do or do not learn. If accountability depends solely on evaluating outcomes of instruction, there would appear to be considerable substance in teachers' fears that they will have to bear the brunt of criticism and be made scapegoats for all the ills of our present society. Thus, teachers view accountability in extremely negative terms and as an almost punitive measure.

Surely accountability can and should be a much more positive concept than this. Dyer (1973), among others, has argued that all of the parties to the total system--teachers, principals,

superintendents, boards of education, legislators, and even parents—have their roles in viable accountability systems. Persons at each level are responsible for making decisions and for the results of those decisions. While each element has its own set of functions, all elements are responsible for improving education within the constraints that society has imposed. Legislators must authorize information systems and provide funds for same. Administrators must assist teachers by providing in-service training, retraining or other corrective measures that evaluation has shown necessary. Parents, also, are accountable for providing, within the limits of their ability, home environments conducive to learning. Above all, the community itself, national, state and local, must hold itself accountable for establishing and maintaining a consensus of values within our pluralistic framework which will nourish and support motivation for classroom learning.

As written, the foregoing may seem straightforward, sensible and logical. In practice, it is much different. Any time human beings are commonly involved in a program aimed at achieving certain goals, they are likely to have somewhat differing notions of which goals are most or least important; which values should be preserved, which sacrificed; what is the most valid determination of success or failure, and what is the acceptable ratio of cost to

achievement. Above all, perhaps, is the matter of who shall make such judgements.

Such conflicts of view are likely to emerge most sharply when the time has come for the program (s) to be evaluated and success or failure determined. Those involved in the program are likely to become not only partisans for their own particular views, but defenders, in advance, of their own roles, willing to accept praise or reward for success, and eager to cast blame elsewhere for failure. Americans are wont to pride themselves on the "scientific nature" of the evaluation process so necessary to accountability. Such scientific evaluations are indispensable if the closest possible approximation to an objective, reliable assessment of an educational program is to be made. Conflicts that are essentially "political" are inimical to the whole evaluation process. Worse still is the almost pathological (at times) need to show some (any) positive outcomes which will convince legislators to continue funding, or the public to vote increased taxes. Political considerations become especially critical when irresistible pressure to achieve results is perceived. Afterward, when the data are questioned and failure rather than success is apparent, the entire process suffers and becomes suspect in the minds of both the public and their elected representatives.

Bolton (1973)) has ascribed to accountability the general

goal of safe-guarding and improving the quality of instruction received by students. Among his recommendations for achieving this goal are (1) programs designed to identify ways to change teacher behaviors; (2) more effective systems for placing or assigning teachers; (3) ways to protect students from incompetent teachers and teachers themselves from incompetent or unprofessional administrators; (4) rewarding superior performance; (5) validating the school system's teacher selection process; and (6) providing programs for teachers' career planning and professional development.

Although the purposes described above would seem important and realizable, they are quite modest when compared to the almost unrealistic expectations that some proponents of accountability hold. To believe that educational accountability will guarantee that children will learn what is taught is, as Redfern (1980) points out, "nonsense". If, as rational, concerned educators, we reflect on the tangled issues and problems of accountability, we will likely conclude that there must be some workable solution(s) that would lead to a valid, reliable assessment of progress. Much, if not all, the rhetoric about accountability refers to evaluation of teachers. Whether the references are to formative or summative evaluation, teachers are told that evaluation is not, nor should it be considered an event. Rather, it is an on-going,

continuous process, the primary purpose of which is the improvement of instruction. It should involve teachers directly as full-fledged partners. While this may be a lofty goal and an ideal to be pursued, rarely, if ever, is it found in practice. For the vast majority of teachers evaluation "happens" once, twice, or three times a year. The evaluators are typically administrators or supervisors who make use of checklists or rating sheets, the creation and development of which teachers have had little, if any input. Teachers tend to view the entire process with considerable apprehension and disdain--accepting praise as obvious, well-deserved, but most frequently, beside the point; and perceiving criticism as subjective, unfair, irrelevant, or simply mistaken. Anyone familiar with the literature or who has discussed evaluation with teachers themselves is aware that like military leaders with their contingency plans, teachers maintain lesson plans and class activities marked, "For Evaluation Only".

Finally, there is little evidence that teachers as a whole receive adequate or constructive feedback of evaluation results which might enable them to make intelligent, professional decisions about improvement. It might even be said that there is little to indicate that educational accountability, as currently practiced, has, in fact, produced better teachers or resulted in better instruction. Combining the functions and processes of

formative and summative evaluation may go far in explaining the reason(s) for this failure.

Two important characteristics of present-day American society impinge very heavily upon our ability to conceptualize the process of teacher evaluation. First, we have developed an ever-increasing sensitiveness toward justice, and a concomitant litigious spirit. As a society, we are no longer willing to passively accept the decisions and pronouncements of those in authority, be they political, economic, or academic. At the first sign of conflict, our typical response is to seek a judicial solution with all the panoply of due process. Thus, it is not enough to discern that a teacher may be weak; the bases upon which the determination is made must be objective, fair, and clearly within the teacher's ken. Such criteria are now included in the regulations of a number of states. For example, policies and guidelines dealing with content area teacher certification examinations used by a growing number of states include "opportunity to learn" clauses as a criterion for test item validity. Similar clauses relating to actual classroom/ instructional skills may readily be seen on the horizon.

The second characteristic is our enchantment with science and the scientific method. The development of an incredible technology of measurement in the physical sciences has made it seem

reasonable to believe that similar advances could be achieved in the behavioral sciences in general, and in education in particular. Within various segments of the American community there is an expectation that the procedures and outcomes of the social sciences can and should match the standards of the physical sciences in their objectivity and power. We have been trained to accept metaphors from the physical sciences in education. Teaching, learning, and instruction are to be measured with a precision comparable to that achieved by physicists in measuring the speed of light or the size of the universe. Unfortunately, educational outcomes are not yet susceptible to such precision. The interactive effects of too many variables are uncertain; the measuring instruments themselves are of questionable validity. Thus, the press for justice and the promise attributed to scientific methodologies seriously impede efforts to devise viable systems for accountability which all interested parties can support.

The problem, therefore, is to design accountability systems which use what we do know and which will also enable us to improve both performance and our knowledge of and about its effects. It implies that there are some factors which can be controlled and others which we must find ways to control. One very important factor that is well within our power to influence is the way in which accountability is defined and perceived. That

accountability is the attribution of responsibility for consequences is easily accepted. In educational endeavors, however, there are many "consequences" and many likely candidates for attribution of responsibility. In systems used to date, accountability has been hierarchical in its applications. Pupils are accountable to teachers; teachers to principals; principals to superintendents, etc. Because it is the teachers who have both the ultimate responsibility and burden of making the entire system function, accountability in education has come to mean "teacher accountability" almost exclusively. Hence the antipathy shown by teachers and teacher union toward effective implementation of any system of accountability.

Such a one-way flow of responsibility is in many ways contrary to our democratic sense of fairness. If pupils are accountable to teachers for performance of assigned work, then it is only fair that teachers be accountable to pupils for seeing to it that the assignments are valid and worthwhile. The two-way relationship between teachers and pupils can be replicated at every stage of what has been defined as a one-way hierarchy. If teachers are accountable to principals for teaching certain subjects to assigned pupils during the school day, then principals should be accountable to teachers for the environment in which the teaching will occur. Just as a two-way pupil-teacher relationship

implies a mutual sharing of effort, so also does a similar relationship between principals and teachers imply that the teachers have the right to partnership in settling the terms of accountability. Similarly, when the line of responsibility flows back from the superintendent and schoolboard to the principals, as well as going in the other more familiar direction, new topics will be opened for discussion, and new attitudes will be displayed in discussing them. Ultimately, of course, the line of responsibility must go back to parents and the community itself. These complete the chain by having the power to vote the school board in or out, vote for additional revenues needed, and assist in the growth of their own children. Parents, and the community at large, surely have the right to expect and demand certain results from the schools and the personnel hired to staff them. Such expectations and demands are clearly unfair and unjust unless the community is willing to accept its part of the responsibility and burden.

This view of accountability--as a two-way relationship between and among all participants at all levels of the educational process--goes to the core of one of the unspoken assumptions about accountability. All persons in the educational process are most fairly accountable when they help decide what things they shall be accountable for, as well as how performance

of those things is to be judged. No one can nor should be expected to agree to perform tasks which are not within their power. Teachers, for example, can and should be expected to agree to possess needed, up-to-date knowledge of content. Equally, they can and should be expected to agree to maintain those levels of clinical teaching and instructional skills consistent with the latest research findings. They cannot, in a moral sense, be expected to agree to be held accountable for things over which they have no control. Thus, in this narrow legal sense, educators cannot morally agree to be accountable for the learning of their students.

Therefore, if by accountability we mean the institution of some means whereby learning is, in fact, assured, then the definition is both invalid and unworkable. If, on the other hand, we mean the establishment of a system designed to bring about the timely availability of and ready access to those factors in the educational process--personnel, materials, working conditions--over which we can exercise control, then we can look forward to a more effective system of educating our children. To bring such a system into being, two things must be done. First, each division or level in the educational process must, with the help and participation of the others, delineate those educational inputs which they can and do control. Second, each division or level

must agree to accept responsibility for carrying out its part. The first task is a collective one, based on knowledge and logic; the second is an individual decision and commitment. For example, teachers may collectively agree to maintain subject matter knowledge and competence in clinical skills, and even agree on means for judging compliance, but only individual teachers acting alone can make the agreement work. Any system of accountability, no matter how well planned it may be, can be subverted by unsympathetic, unwilling personnel. This is why the active participation of and agreement by all concerned are so crucial.

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